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ABSTRACT

To prepare young people and adults for labor market success, career-technical education (CTE) practitioners must know how to find and use work force information. Recent federal legislation, including the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, underscores the importance of work force education. The nationwide work force information system makes data on labor market conditions and trends accessible through analysis and delivery tailored to users' needs. For CTE, the following are key work force information uses: (1) helping students and parents make informed choices about secondary and postsecondary education and careers; and (2) helping practitioners and policymakers make decisions about programs, curriculum, and resource allocation and about improving linkages with employers. The following are among critical areas for improving the work force information system: (1) strengthening local data; (2) improving data quality, consistency, and timeliness; (3) filling key data gaps; (4) improving analysis and information delivery; and (5) obtaining customer feedback. To face the problems encountered in accessing and using work force information, CTE practitioners can use guidelines and standards developed by the National Career Development Association and the Association of Computer-Based Systems of Career Information. (An annotated list of six Internet sources and a list of five references are included.) (MN)

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IN Brief
Fast Facts for Policy and Practice
2000 no. 10
National Dissemination Center for Career & Technical Education

by Dixie Sommers

Work Force Information and Career-Technical Education

- Two-thirds of the fastest growing occupations over the next decade are in the computer and health fields.
- The most rapid growth will be in occupations requiring an associate degree or higher. However, one in four job openings will be in occupations where only short-term on-the-job training is needed.
- Although total employment increased by about 2 million in 1999, over 1.1 million workers lost their jobs that year through layoffs and plant closings.

(Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor)

To prepare young people and adults for labor market success, career-technical educators need to be responsive to these and other sometimes confusing labor market trends. Knowing how to find and use work force information is the key. High-quality work force information also is important for students and their parents, as well as for adults, as they make education, training, and job choices. There is some evidence that access to such information improves students' earnings after high school (Crawford et al. 1997).

Recent federal legislation underscores the importance of work force information. Section 118 of Perkins III reaffirmed the need for career information. The Office of Vocational and Adult Education has responded by creating America's Career Resource Network and funding states to improve the quality and accessibility of career information. America's Career Resource Network replaces the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee.

In the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Section 309 lays out the requirements for the "employment statistics system" and charges the Secretary of Labor and state Governors with system planning, management, and oversight. This mandate is being carried out by the Workforce Information Council at the federal level, and by the "state employment statistics agencies" designated by the Governors.

What Is Work Force Information?

Work force information, also called "labor market information," encompasses the full range of information about labor market conditions and trends, including employment and unemployment, industry and occupational employment and wages, labor market projections, business lists, current job vacancies, data about individual workers or job seekers, and information on education and training resources.

The nationwide work force information system makes the data accessible and useful through analysis and delivery tailored to the needs of the user. Delivery systems may range from career information systems designed for use by middle school students to technical database access for economic researchers. Systems are increasingly built for Internet delivery.

Work Force Information in Practice

For career-technical education, key work force information uses are (1) helping students and their parents make informed choices about secondary and postsecondary education and careers, and (2) helping administrators, teachers, and policymakers make decisions about program offerings, curriculum, and resource allocation and about improving linkages with employers.

For student decision making, key information about careers and jobs includes job duties and the nature of the work, work settings and working conditions, preparation required, methods of entry to the career field, earnings and other benefits, employment outlook, and related occupations. Career information is often linked with assessment tools, such as interest assessments, helping students focus in on the information most pertinent to them. For administrators, teachers, and policy makers, key work force information includes employment trends and earnings in occupations and data about skill and other requirements.

Often, the two major uses of work force information coincide. In Florida, for example, a list of high-demand, high-wage occupations is used to feature employment opportunities in career information products and to target training by community colleges, school district vocational centers, and WIA training organizations (Florida State Plan 1998).

The use of "career pathways" or "career clusters" also bridges the two major information uses in career-technical education. As states and more recently the Office of Vocational and Adult Education have adopted career clusters, work force information for the clusters is appearing in career information resources, such as New York's CareerZone system <http://nycareerzone.org/>, and in curriculum materials, such as Oregon's Certificates of Advanced Mastery <http://www.ode.state.or.us/opte/CAM/index.htm>.

Improving Work Force Information

The Workforce Information Council (2000) has issued its first annual plan, ***Quality Information…Informed Choices: New Directions for the Workforce Information System***, articulating a vision and identifying goals and objectives for improving the system. The plan is used to support federal budget requests and agency investments related to work force information. The plan identifies strengths of the system, including existing data collection systems and standards, new analysis tools, research and development capacity, innovative delivery systems using the Internet and other technology, and longstanding cooperative federal-state relationships.

Among the critical areas needing attention are strengthening local data, improving data quality and consistency and timeliness, filling key data gaps, improving analysis and information delivery, and obtaining customer feedback.

Recent improvements to the work force information database include providing wage information by occupation, and providing occupational skills and other characteristics information by the Occupational Information Network (O*NET), replacing the obsolete ***Dictionary of Occupational Titles***.

The plan, which covers federal fiscal years 2000-2004, prioritizes improvements to local labor force and unemployment data, occupational wage data, and state and area projections. Additional priorities are establishing regular updating of O*NET, improving information delivery, and implementing a customer satisfaction program.

Issues in Accessing and Using Work Force Information

Career-technical educators may face a number of problems in using the work force information system, given the variety of information providers, products, delivery systems, and the complexity of the data itself. Although a wealth of information is available, educators may find it difficult to locate the right information for their particular purposes or may not find the information presented in an understandable or usable form. These problems may reflect the difficulty of translating statistical resources into presentation and narrative accessible to users unfamiliar with statistics.

Turning data into usable information may mean integrating different types of data to tell a coherent story. For example, employment and wage trends must be analyzed together–and related to information about training resources and job vacancies–to understand the extent of worker shortages in specific fields.

The Workforce Information Council's plan stresses the development of analysis and delivery capacity among the state employment statistics agencies to bridge the divide between information producers and users.

Career-technical educators are often faced with choices among many information sources. How will they know which ones to select? Which sources provide the most relevant and accurate information for the educator's needs? Fortunately, in the realm of career information, educators can make use of guidelines and standards developed by the National Career Development Association and the Association of Computer-Based Systems of Career Information.

For other types of information, care should be taken to evaluate the various information sources, especially if the purposes for which they will be used are critical, such as influencing program funding decisions.

Where to Go for Information and Help

- *State employment statistics agencies* are the key source of work force information at the state and local levels. Links to state work force information sites may be found at http://www.workforceinfocouncil.org/links.htm.
- The *Association of Computer-based Systems of Career Information* provides links to state career information delivery systems at http://www.acsci.org.
- The U.S. Department of Labor's *Bureau of Labor Statistics* provides comprehensive national career information in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and is the primary source of employment, wage and other national data (http://stats.bls.gov). BLS supports much of the data collection work of the state employment statistics agencies.
- The U.S. Department of Labor's *Employment and Training Administration* sponsors America's Career Kit, a set of national web-based resources including America's Job Bank (http://www.ajb.org), America's Learning Exchange (http://www.alx.org), and America's Career InfoNet (http://www.acinet.org).
- Information about the Occupational Information Network, O*NET, is available at http://www.onetcenter.org. The O*NET system is available at http://online.onetcenter.org.
- The *Workforce Information Council's* annual plan and other information are provided at http://www.workforceinfocouncil.org.

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